DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 151 827 CS 204 010

AUTHOR Frazier, Virginia F.
TITLE The Future of the English Department.
PUB DATE Nov 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (67th, New York City, November 24-26, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Change; *Educational Trends; *English Departments; *English Instruction; Futures (of Society); Prediction; Secondary Education; *Teacher Responsibility; *Teacher Role; Teachers; Teaching Conditions

ABSTRACT

English teachers and the English Department are in danger of losing their identity. This paper describes the problems that English departments can expect in the future. Faced with budgetary cutbacks and public demands for teaching basic skills and for minimum-competency tests, future English department administrators and teachers will be expected to be better prepared, to know more, and to do more. The paper concludes that English departments will survive in the future only if department members express their commitment to education and their love of English. (RL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED151827

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

THE FUTURE OF THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

BY

Virginia F. Frazier
Central High School
St. Joseph, Missouri

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Virginia F. Frazier

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND THE ERIC SYSTEM CONTRACTORS."

as delivered at the National Council of Teachers of English, Friday, November 24, 1977, New York. The speech was recorded by NCTE and is available on tape.

C 5204 010

THE FUTURE OF THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

Virginia F. Frazier

The topic "The Future of the English Department" implies a certain omniscience which I don't possess. Forecasting the future requires the tools of the trade--the crystal ball of the medium, the charts and graphs of the weather-man; we might use a "mirror, mirror" on the wall, for we can look in but not go through the looking glass. If we don't have myopic vision, some clear signs are visible.

Sometimes I find myself sounding like the Red Queen in Alice in Wonderland; for I can see the Queen in the wonderful glass:

> Now here, you see,
> It takes all the running you can do
> To keep the same place.
> If you want to get someplace else,
> You must run at least twice as fast as that.
> (Chapter II)

English teachers, let us accelerate. Remember, too, the grinning Cheshire cat from Alice. Perhaps we've grinned complacently too long. The grin without the grinner has lost its cat. We are in danger of losing our cats--our English Departments, our jobs, our teachers. It's Paradise Lost now. Our throne has been shaken. Will it ever be Paradise Regained? No--if indeed it ever was paradise. It could all end "Not with a bang but a whimper."

In a past some present are too young to have experienced and others could not know because of the particularities of their

teaching situations, I thought teaching was close to Paradise. Now, in the autumn of my career, every winter has become "the winter of my discontent"--a discontent which I fear the public shares. In school, for some students, it is "eternal winter there," as Blake said. Tragically, too many of our children have become the endangered species. Too many of them are functional illiterates in a so-called enlightened age, in the same position as George Smart in William Golding's short story, "The Anglo-Saxon."

> . . . Six hundred fifty words were hung on hooks in George's dark cupboard, blunt words, broken and worn, clung to out of custom like a chipped cup. (William Golding, "The Anglo-Saxon")

Society seems not to value the gifts of our children and the language that is ours enough to wed the two.

I am afraid I may have become an anachronism in my own time, like Tennyson's "Ulysses"--"an old grey spirit yearning in desire." I fear and believe that mediocrity will be the new order; that English Departments could become functionaries for other departments, dedicated to the proposition that all intellects are equal and that punctuation and spelling are the most important things we can teach, to students who may have nothing to say and no desire to say it. We may be forced to let go--we may have to quit teaching good literature, to quit insisting on good writing. Then, the world of words will eventually be re-discovered and we'll start over. We may have to lose it before the "New Renaissance." And, of course, I'll be dead by then!

I posed the question, "What is the future of the English Department" to colleagues in Idaho, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Oregon, Iowa,

North Carolina, California, New York, and Missouri, naturally. Some of the responses were flip, cynical, provocative, truthful. Can you detect a quiet desperation which was the response of a student? These are samplings of the answers:

1. What future?
2. What English Department?
3. Does it matter?
4. Why ask just about the English Department?
5. English? We should support it at all costs.
6. A future without an English Department? You've got to be kidding.
7. It's unthinkable.
8. The future of the English Department is linked to the future of the schools--of education, in general.
9. Dim.
10. It has no future.

But don't believe it. Let's look at the Department and at what we face. Department implies a sense of community, of commonalty of purpose. But for administrators, perhaps English Department Chair is just an easy term. Many departments are stuck together with peanut butter and teachers are without bread! Economics may determine the future of the Department. We are in danger of losing our identity. The duties and responsibilities of the Department Chair may be (but usually are not) clearly stated. But stated or not, clearly Department leadership will be where we find it. We must have a caring/sharing mutual concern for the welfare of the Department, for who and what our kids are, for all are inextricably bound in a Gordian

knot. Never have we been so needed; never has the public been so negative. Never have we heard as many braying asses telling us what our job is.

Is anyone asking, "What is the future of Football?" I sent two of my good students--excellent football players also--to the coaches to find out the cost of a football and how many our large school buys each year. I didn't get a complete answer, but I learned that twenty new footballs are the equivalent of my Department pay! Now, that makes me feel "kicked around." As a Department, we must use necessary tactics and strategies; we must expect to feel pain; we must be crisis-centered. We don't need to expect any sympathy. We must do the biggest "selling job" for our subject that we've ever done.

As we stand on the quicksands of diminishing confidence, this is no time for "false modesty." We face an economic pinch that is strong and worsening. We face public outrage. In a "shaky" world, safety lies in the traditional, in the "what was." It's not the "voice of the turtle" we hear in the land! We meet apathetic kids who find nothing meaningful in the schools; we face the development of and teaching of more courses such as those now called the "survival skills"; we face restrictions and controls at all levels. We could be legislated right out of business! We are never through battling censorship or the divisiveness among ourselves, or a media all too willing to place blame on us and to publicize declining test scores. In fact, we face a general dehumanization in society. Problems in teacher preparation will continue. While colleges decry the lack of ability in composition, they still certify un-prepared English teachers to teach. We still face the problem of tenure.

While I'm glad I have it, tenure can and sometimes does perpetuate poor teaching; conversely, it can remove good teachers to cut salary costs. We face the removal of supportive, necessary services--fewer books and magazines, fewer librarians. Look for increasing competition among Departments. The more we give students choices in selecting classes, the more we begin to compete for them. Don't assume that the outcry of Back to the Basics will just go away. Basics won't be any more effective than putting a toad in a tomato patch. True literacy might solve many of our problems.

We see increasing mediocrity and the acceptance of it. Soon we will become a society of skilled illiterates. Will passing basic competency tests become a standard of excellence? Last year's (1976-77) Gallup Poll found that parents listed as most important in education "learning to think for oneself" and "ability to get along with others" second. Ranking last (4% of the responses) was "the desire to excel." I read that and remembered the words of Schlegel: "Genius is the almost unconscious choice of the highest degree of excellence."

We face increasing job loss. Do you remember the old "Golden Book of Favorite Songs?" My favorite selection in that was "We shall meet but we shall miss him. There will be a vacant chair." That vacant chair might well belong to one of us!

Certainly, there will be increasing demands for truth, honesty, clarity in oral and written statements. Of what good is the correctly punctuated, perfectly balanced, beautifully paralled lie? We will continue to find the power for decision-making far-removed from the classroom. We must influence decisions that affect our Departments, ourselves, and our children.

Enough of what face. Despite the seeming pessimism, out of the total cacophony, we will choreograph the nonsense, order the chaos, because we know something deeply down inside, at "gut" level: "We have a Rendezvous, not with death, but with love--of English."

As I probe the future, I see these things dimly as the future of the English Department:

1. We will no longer be called English teachers. Perhaps we'll be facilitators, skills consultants, communications helpers. Whatever the title, we will be placed in a less than major role.

2. Technical knowledge is needed. We will all be media specialists.

3. We'll need strong backgrounds in all kinds of the psychology of human behavior "That may well be our major.) Our kids are all human-being color. We can't deny them the right to language, but much of the time, we simply don't know how to reach them.

4. We need a vast knowledge of the many resources, and how to make them available.

5. We must have a variety of teaching techniques--most of which have not yet been developed.

6. We must make more use of available research in English and reading.

7. We must be reading specialists.

8. We will need less knowledge of the traditional subject matter of English, especially the esoteric, the highly sophisticated.

9. We'll develop whole new vocabularies.

10. Our work loads will increase.

11. We must be strong people, at home with ourselves, but not egotisitcal; fully aware that teaching is trouble (capital T's.)

12. We can look for a coming, eventually, of shared responsiblity. Everyone with a direct interest would have input and be responsible for outcome.

13. We need a strong sense of realism without the loss of idealism.

14. We must be bi-lingual, know how to teach English as a second language (at a time in which secondary and college departments of Foreign Language are "cutting back.")

15. We must be excellent interpreters of tests and scores.

Let's end on a positive note. We face a nearly impossible future, but "Look homeward, Angels." Out of the "winters of our discontent," we <u>will</u> survive. And while we look, let's sing the words of a once popular song:

"You've gotta give a little
Take a little,
And let your poor heart break a little.
That's the story of
That's the glory of Love'
--of English!